

## A Camino Tale

For many, I think, Santiago de Compostela is a sugar tit, as we say down South. That is to say, it's a substitute for a mother's breast. It is good; it is sweet, but it is only a substitute for the real thing.

When you walk The Way, trekking to the tomb of the Apostle is, on first blush, *the* goal; *the* target; *the* destination of the journey. But as I reflect on my Camino time – full disclosure here: I only walked the first 100 miles or so – it seems to me that the trip termination at the “field of stars” can be perhaps illusionary.

I met many pilgrims, from all over the world, and I wanted to know *their* story. So, I asked. I was amazed to discover how many were walking for answers to personal questions, the most prevalent of which seemed to be “What do I want to do with my life from here on?” This was particularly true for folks in their late 20s or early 30s. Many had excellent jobs before this ambulatory adventure, but they had quit/resigned because of a deeper realization that their job, though they often loved it, was not what they wanted; there *had* to be more. I found they often liked their job, but it was not their passion.

However, they were not sure what Plan B was. So they ended that part of their life, loaded up a backpack, boarded a plane or a train or a bus (or maybe all three in succession) and struck out for St. Jean Pied-de-Port or Roncesvalles or Pamplona or wherever their head and heart told them to begin striding toward Santiago.

The Eagles sing:

*So oftentimes it happens,  
That we live our lives in chains,  
And we don't even know we have the key.*

Khalil Gibran wrote:

Paradise is there, behind that door, in the next room; but I have lost the key.  
Perhaps I have only mislaid it.

I cursed the rocks. Their presence on my path really irritated me...for a while. But one day along the trail, I recalled a Spanish *peregrino* my wife and I met on our first day out of Roncesvalles. He was returning...yes, *returning*...from Santiago. He had walked there and was now walking back. We were awed, but as we talked, he gave what proved to be sage advice. With a big smile, he said, “Walk slowly, especially the first week. Get accustomed to the weight you are carrying. (Did he just mean my overly filled pack? Or was he speaking in metaphor? One pilgrim told me early on that my Deuter would get lighter once it gave birth. Thanks, Brian.) And look around you; see the

flowers; take in the views. Look. See. This is *your* Camino, not mine, not hers (pointing at my wife, Roz). *Yours!!*"

Later, I truthfully trudged onward, and I pondered his words; my eyes were cast downward, watching my step, But something caused me to *really* look at those accursed rocks. And I began to *see*. By God, *they* were metaphors also. They represented all of us on The Camino; the rocks *were* pilgrims. They were different shapes, different sizes, different colors, different ages, and different genders (?) just like us peripatetic *peregrinos*. And like us, they were stones strewn out along an ancient path towards Santiago.

You have a lot of time to think along The Way. And the lines quoted above came to me as I reflected on those young people who were searching for their answers. They reminded me of a hitchhiker I saw on the side of the road many years ago. He held a sign that said, "Anywhere but here!"

So, back to my original premise. Santiago is not in and of itself the goal. It is the means for many to find that misplaced key they already have to life fulfillment, whatever that may be: job, family, purpose, passion. My brief experience has led me to believe wholeheartedly that epiphanies abound along the Camino, and often in the most unexpected place or manner. I suspect many got their answer.

Mass is the celebration of sacrifice and the Pilgrim Mass in that magnificent cathedral in Santiago de Compostela celebrates the sacrifices made along The Way by each one who makes the trek as well as sacrifice embodied in the crucifixion. It is my hope that it celebrates, with each huge, arching swing of the *botafumeiro*, those answers discovered along that arduous path; it is my hope that it celebrates the veracity of St. Augustine's words *Solvitur ambulando* -- It is "solved by walking." *Buen camino, amigos, y ¡Ultreia!*

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